



Wide vs. Skinny & HD vs. SD - Tips on Aspect Ratio

It is inevitable that there will always be new electronics and new technology which means more format options and confusion for many consumers. While High Definition has been around for decades it is only now starting to become the prevailing production mode. As consumers scramble to figure out what kind of monitor they should purchase and clients can't figure out how they should have their production shot, it is important to clarify the terms in question.

Wide-screen vs. "Standard"

It is now common knowledge that major retailers are only selling wide-screen TV's/monitors now. The "standard" monitors have a 4 by 3 aspect ratio, giving the picture an almost square shape only slightly wider than tall. Wide-screens have a 16 by 9 aspect ratio, the width and shape of most movie screens. "Letter Box" is a term referring to a 16:9 picture inset inside a 4:3 screen. Since all new TV's are going to be wide-screen, we believe it makes sense to shoot new productions in wide-screen. Some clients have hesitated doing this for different reasons. Some are comfortable with the 4:3 aspect ratio and fear other people won't have wide-screen TV's and they do not like the look of letterboxing. This opinion is dying as fast as the sales of 4:3 TV's. Every public place with a screen is 16:9 these days and people are already so used to letterboxing on 4:3 screens that you see a letterbox-type frame around ads of all shapes and sizes now, making the ad look more "movie-esque" and at the same time providing convenient space above and below the picture for graphics.

Squeezed vs. Stretched

Sometimes you may see video on a wide screen that looks stretched - everyone looks fat - not how most people want to be photographed. This occurs when something shot in 4:3 is shown on a wide-screen - a very important reason to film in 16:9. This way, the picture will look good on wide-screen monitors and if it is shown on a 4:3 TV, it will be letterboxed, not "squeezed." The only time you may see a squeezed picture is when you film in wide-screen and then display that image directly on a 4:3 monitor. Anything that has been edited properly will automatically format in a letterbox on a 4:3 monitor and not look "squeezed." While we may all be on diets, a squeezed picture is not flattering either!

Letterboxing vs. Cropping

If you film a production in wide-screen you can edit it so that it will be shown in letterbox on a 4:3 screen as noted earlier. Or you can also crop the image so that it fills a 4:3 frame. When filming something that might be shown in 4:3, it is important to frame the essential action within the 4:3 frame. Most cameras have frame markers in the viewfinder, but it may be necessary to put some thin pieces of tape on a monitor the client is looking at to signify the 4:3 cut-off.

What are the options for a production that is utilizing existing 4:3 footage? Of course there are decades of valuable footage already shot in 4:3 and the options are not to throw that footage away or to stretch it. You can design a letterbox frame for this footage using either a graphic border or extending the background image digitally. You can also layer footage into smaller frames in a montage effect. When combining existing 4:3 footage with new wide-screen footage, we have often used the new wide-screen shots as a background image with the 4:3 shots inset. We used this to great effect on the City of Arlington video. We had a lot of existing standard definition 4:3 shots donated to us that we integrated with our new wide-screen HD footage.

High Definition vs. Standard Definition

Wide-screen does NOT automatically mean HD. High Definition relates to the greater number of lines of resolution of the image and not necessarily the shape. Standard Definition can be filmed in either 4:3 or 16:9 and High Definition can be displayed wide or it can be cropped or letterboxed. When filming television ads, we film in High Definition regardless, to give the highest image quality. Then we often edit a High Definition master and standard definition master for stations that can broadcast both. Not every TV station currently has the capability to broadcast ads in HD, but more and more do. The HD versions are broadcast to people that have HD service and the SD version goes out to everyone else.

1080 vs. 720 HD

High Definition can have either 1080 or 720 lines of resolution. Our HVX-200 cameras can shoot either 1080 or 720, yet many of the most popular HD cameras such as the VariCam can only shoot 720. Down converted to standard definition, 1080 and 720 will look the same -- the only way you can see a difference is if you compare 720 and 1080 HD on a 1080 screen that is over 50 inches.

p vs. i

Many people wonder what the "p" means in 1080p or 720p. "P" stands for progressive scan vs. "i" or interlaced. In progressive scan, all the even and odd lines of resolution in a frame are scanned sequentially and at the same time to give the footage a smoother image with more detail, sometimes described as "film look." With interlaced, first the odd lines of resolution are scanned, followed by the even lines in twice the amount of time as progressive. This looks fine on a cathode ray type of monitor, but on a computer monitor or digital screen, there sometimes appears to be a "flicker effect." There are much more detailed, precise definitions available but the intent here is to be concise and not too confusing.

Digital vs. Analog

Progressive scan, wide screen and High Definition are all only available with a digital signal. In February 2009, all tv signals will be digital and it will be necessary to either have a digital TV or to have an analog to digital converter (the government will be providing coupons for those unable to afford them). Digital signals do not have ghosting and do not become weaker or stronger depending on the circumstances - you either have an image or you do not. There is also a greater consistency of color and many other features such as surround sound, multiple language audio and text services in addition to much higher picture quality in the same or less bandwidth as analog.

Now that you have decided you want a new digital, wide screen tv (preferably HD) what kind should you get? There are brand names and sizes to consider and here consumers will go with what brands they are familiar with and sizes that work for their space and budget limitations. They will also choose between 720 vs. 1080, but keep in mind that the differences between 720 and 1080 are not discernable on screens under 50 inches.

DLP, Plasma and LCD

DLP is the rear-screen projection TV using "the thousands of tiny mirrors" we hear about in the Texas Instruments commercials. While the picture is great, these systems come in very large screens, large in depth and also very heavy, so they are not at all portable and you need more space than with a flat screen. Also, if you are not at eye level with the screen, it can look dark. Plasmas and LCD's are flat screens, so they are light and can literally mount on your wall like a picture. The drawback to plasma screens is that they are made of glass and thus are highly reflective. In a room with lots of windows or lamps at the same angle as the screen, there are tons of reflections. LCD's don't have this problem, but like DLP's they also must be viewed at the proper angle for optimal results. Prices between the three formats range widely based on brand, size, retailer, and day of the week.

What else do you need to see HD besides buying an HD TV? An HD TV does not automatically show you images in HD. In fact, you will notice that analog TV signals look much worse on an HD TV than an analog TV. Digital signals will look very nice, but you will need to make sure your cable, satellite or fiber provider has you equipped with HD service to see programs in full HD. Right now only certain networks and cable broadcast in HD; soon more and more will. Some of the HD broadcasts will come bundled into your plan and other premium HD networks may cost extra. To view DVD's in HD you will need an HD TV, and HD DVD and an HD DVD player. While there was a strong fight between competing HD DVD formats it appears that Blu-Ray has won that fight, so that is one less decision you have to agonize over. The Internet can already broadcast High Definition and in time should become the predominant HD delivery system.

Tips On Multi-Media

More and more video companies are having to answer the question for their clients: "Should all this be on the web? Or on a disc? CD, DVD or Blu-Ray?" The answer to this question can only be reached by first answering a series of other questions regarding the eventual end-use. Below is an essential "Top Ten List".

1. What is the end-use purpose of the program? (i.e. training, education, marketing, etc.)
2. What will the end-use delivery platform be? (i.e. mail out, kiosk display, laptop presentation, etc.)
3. How many systems will be used? (i.e. a single kiosk, a small network of main-frames, a universal PC platform to be distributed widely, etc.)
4. What kinds of media should be on the program? (i.e. text screens, audio, still pictures, full motion video, animation, etc.) (Also, how important would full-screen, full motion video be, as opposed to video-in-a-window?)
5. How many different topics would be included and how complex the branching? (In other words, does the client envision different routes the user could take and how many?)
6. Would there be tests/quizzes?
7. Would there be a need for individual user log-on codes (For employee training, security, tracking and scoring of quizzes, etc.)
8. Would the disk need to be multi-lingual and if so, how many languages?
9. Approximate budget range and time frame. (Multi-Media is more expensive and time-intensive than linear video.)
10. How often would the program be updated? How many copies will be needed?

Keep in mind that the Internet has become a delivery system of interactive media. A website provides a fluid-ever changing, international presence and can be used to transact e-commerce. Visitors to the site can be tracked and the site can be a great point of contact and powerful communication tool. Video segments can be pre-produced and downloadable from your site, as can live webcast events we film and stream from remote locations. We suggest tying all of your media together to maximize its effectiveness. For example, a DVD or CD should offer a direct link to your website. And a visitor to your website should be able to download your most current and relevant corporate video or commercial in a variety of formats.

Location, Location, Location! "On Location"

All this talk about new locations and sound stages got us thinking about the very concept of location and what it means to be on-location. So in this issue of Tips and Points, we discuss the challenges of coordinating an out-of-town shoot.

Many projects require footage from other locations around the world. The first question that always arises is: Should people be sent to those locations or hired from those locations? In order to answer that question, first ask yourself the following:

Who is this project for, your site or the out-of-town site?

If the project is being made for the latter, it is best to have someone from that location coordinate the people and events to be shot and to interface with the camera crew. If the project is for you, you may want to be there or you will need to send someone there whom is experienced with video in order to get the shots and/or sound-bites that you need. Ideally, there is upfront planning and communication about the objectives of the shoot with point-people from both locations.

Who is putting the piece together?

Presumably, you have already determined who is writing the script and editing the video. That production entity should be able to help you make a decision about the out-of-town shoot. Since the scripting and editing processes can be extensive, it is important that those resources are near you. Once you have determined your client point-person and your main production entity, discuss the following with each of them: How much screen time is devoted to the out-of-town location? If only short references are made in the video to this location, the issues involved with producing these shoots are not as critical. For example, your video may only require an exterior building shot, in which case a local videographer can be contracted and sent to get the footage without a great deal of consultation and instruction. An existing photo or broadcast-quality video may also serve the purpose. If the footage needs to be more extensive or specific, the video crew will need more guidance and the shoot will require more coordination.

How many locations are involved?

With multiple out-of-town locations, it becomes even more imperative to have at least one person responsible for the overall message of the video to go to each location in order to maintain consistency. The project should ideally be shot with the same kind of camera and with similar lighting styles, etc.

Once you have answered these questions, you can weigh the pros and cons of hiring locally versus sending a crew.

Finding and hiring an out-of-town production resource

Keep in mind that production company rates may vary from city to city, as may the levels of service and quality they can provide. In certain remote areas, it is simply not an option to hire a local crew. Again consult with the video production company in your area. If the production company chooses to subcontract the shoot to a local resource they use, then they are responsible for the quality and for payment.

If you are searching these capabilities yourself, the Net is an excellent resource for locating resources as are production manuals available from State Film Commissions (many of which also offer web-sites). Look well ahead of the shoot date if possible, so you can review references and demo materials from prospects, just as you would for a turn-key job. A post-production facility may also be able to recommend to you locals crews they are familiar with. Keep in mind that hiring an out-of-town production resource will most likely entail paying C.O.D.

Arranging Crew Travel

Shoot day rates may already be covered in the original budget, but travel expenses are subject to so much change, that they are best left off the production company's proposal. Let them worry about the video and call a travel agent to get an approximation of average air fares and the advance purchase requirements. If you make the reservations yourself, you do not face the risk of paying for a mark-up, plus most production companies would prefer that the client handles this. Similarly, hotel accommodations and rent-cars can be reserved in advance on the client's credit card, even though the persons traveling may be required to produce their own credit cards by certain establishments. Meals, parking, transfers, tips and tolls are all reimbursable travel expenses that should be accounted for. These costs do add up, but keep in mind that you may be getting certain volume discounts from hiring one supplier to turn-key produce the entire project as opposed to hiring several different contractors in each city. It is even possible to fly a crew to more than one location in a day, but pushing a crew too hard will meet with diminished results.

Consider the travel time involved for the crew as part of the shoot day. Some companies will bill for the time sitting on an airplane at a reduced rate; some will not bill at all, but it should be factored into the total hours worked for the day. Also allow for time-zone changes and the time needed to adjust to them. For long distances, it is best to fly-out the evening before the shoot, if possible. Most production companies will not charge for their time if it allows them a good night's sleep before a shoot.

More Travel Tips and Points

In keeping with the honey vs. vinegar approach, it's important to remember that travel can be hectic and it is always harder work on the road than it is at home. The easier you can make the logistics of the travel, the more production time you can get out of a day. For example, try to book hotels near the job site -- this is much more important to the crew than deluxe accommodations. However, they do want their own separate rooms. 5-Star Dining is not necessary, but dinner should at least be a step above airport food -- they'll get plenty of that anyway.

Allow for additional time getting in and out of airports. Book direct flights, preferably to airports closest to the shoot locations. Remember that at least two crew members are needed to go on an out-of-town shoot, for safety and security reasons. A two-person crew should be able to hand-carry onto a plane enough production equipment to get started, even if baggage was lost. This would include: camera/deck, monitor, battery, tape, microphone and cables. Typically, the crew will send as baggage a tripod, lighting kit, battery charger/AC adapter and additional cables, tape and batteries.

The videocamera/deck should be hand-checked and not sent through the x-ray. You should also avoid passing film or shot videotapes through the x-ray, no matter what they tell you. The hand-checking can take time, so allow at least another 45 minutes.

Tips for airport baggage handlers and hotel valets are good insurance on valuable equipment that is needed or cart rentals may also be used.

Interviews/Testimonial – Preparation

1. Proper preparation techniques can maximize the opportunity for shooting testimonials. Once you have identified the participants, it is courteous and conducive to a successful interview to brief the participants approximately a week beforehand.
2. Prepare a list of proposed questions and considerations ahead of time and send them to the interviewees and to the production company to review. Interview questions should be open-ended, preferably starting with "Why" or "How." Interviewees should be asked to incorporate the question in answer and to speak in complete sentences. Explain that they will look and speak directly to the interviewer, as opposed to the camera and that the viewer will only hear the answers, not the questions. This technique is commonplace on television news shows, for example. While the answers should be complete sentences, try to keep them short and concise. This is called a "good sound-bite."
3. If possible, meet with the interviewees to address any of their concerns. Stress that these are the types of questions that may be asked, but are not necessarily the exact questions. Discourage scripting or memorizing answers; instead tell them to try to answer in their own words. Note their initial responses and which questions they are most comfortable with. Ask them if they have ever done this kind of thing before and thank them for their time and input. Try to avoid using questions that the interviewees were initially uncomfortable with. By the same token, try to avoid if possible, interviewing someone who seems hesitant or uncooperative.
4. Interviewees should preferably avoid wearing white, black or red. Solid, muted colors like blue, green, brown, gray, yellow, or salmon are best. Also avoid thin stripes, distracting patterns or noisy jewelry. If a person wears glasses, plan for a few extra minutes of lighting set-up. Also, ask the person if it will be ok to apply a little powder to the face, if necessary.
5. Finalize your list of questions and study them. Practice them with an associate and memorize them so that at the time of the interview, you will be able to have as natural a conversation as possible.

Interviews/Testimonial – Scheduling

1. Secure quiet areas that do not interfere with other activities for the interview, if possible. Try to arrange a location scout, if you are unfamiliar with it. Note existing light sources and power outlets. Windows are fine, but should be avoided as a background. Use a plain wall instead with perhaps a plant and a non-distracting picture hanging. These props should be arranged to the side of the interview subject, so as not to look like they are growing out of his or her head! This kind of background can also be easily changed for multiple interviews in the same location, but it is best to vary locations, if time allows.
2. Think of any other shots that can be captured at the location and/or with the interviewee. These shots should supply visual support for the subject being discussed. Plan these shots to coincide with the person and location's availability. The idea is to capture everything you need from one area before moving to another.
3. When creating your schedule, allow approximately one hour to get into the location and set-up before the interviewee arrives, so you are not wasting that person's time. Allow approximately 30 to 45 minutes to set-up in an adjoining location. Allow approximately 45 minutes to shoot the interview.
4. The day before the interview, call everyone and remind them of the time and location. Find out what they plan on wearing -- hopefully not all of them will be wearing the same color!

Interviews/Testimonial – Production

1. Arrive early and find out who at the location will help you direct all the people involved to the proper location. Sign in the camera crew and obtain any camera passes, if required.
2. The crew should light the area and test microphones with a person "standing-in" preferably the same height as the interviewee. Lighting may vary from available light only, to standard 3-point lighting (key, fill, backlight) to more extensive background lighting using colors and patterns. Microphones may either be boomed or clipped on. Typically, clip-ons are less intimidating to the interviewee.
3. The interviewer will be placed either slightly to the left or to the right of camera. Keep track of which way the interviewees are facing. You will want to alternate this from interview to interview in the finished video. The camera will zoom-in or zoom-out from question to question, but it will not need to be moved.
4. Once the interviewee arrives, break the ice and then allow him or her to be placed, miked and powdered. Remind the person to forget the cameras and just talk to you (easier said than done, you can confide to them). Begin casually discussing the interview subjects, allowing time to get used to the bright lights and to re-check the audio. But do not wear-out the interviewee before the cameras have started recording!
5. Once the camera is recording, you may want to begin by having the person say their name and title and even spell their name. This gives more time to check audio levels, eases the interviewee into the testimonial, and provides the editor with a handy reference for supering the name and title. Casually segue into the interview questions. You may smile and nod to help the interviewee, but you should avoid talking or making any noises at the same time. For optimal editing flexibility, wait two seconds after each answer before saying anything and encourage the interviewee to hold his or her focus for the same length of time. This keeps the audio clean and also gives the cameraperson time to zoom-in or out.
6. If you are not pleased with an answer, try to rephrase the question. If this subject had been discussed in the pre-interview, remind the person of something they said that stuck with you. If this still does not work, move on. You can not afford to let the interviewee lose confidence.
7. Pay attention to the answers instead of thinking ahead to the next question. You can always pause between questions to gather your thoughts. You can also ask the interviewee if he or she is pleased with the answer, but try to avoid playing back the tape after every question to speed up the process.

Interviews/Testimonial - Presentation Recording Tips

There is a cottage industry that exists in consulting and coaching Corporate America in speech and presentation skills. There is some information out there on the preparation of presentation materials, but virtually no information on preparing for the best live and recorded presentation. There is a certain give and take with considerations to the live audience versus the DVD or web viewers, and it is helpful to know how to maximize the quality for both.

PowerPoint (and other presentation materials)

If designing your own PowerPoint presentation, try to use dark backgrounds like blue with white letters. White or light backgrounds create a great deal of contrast between the relatively low light level on the presenter and the brightness of the screen. Blue makes a nice background that also compliments skin tone and makes it look warmer.

It is best to be able to secure either a rear screen or be able to position the laptop and projector close enough to the screen that the presenter is never standing in the projection. It is best to stand between the projector and the audience and definitely to be closer to the audience, if possible, than the screen. You can refer to the slide without having to physically touch it. A laser pointer can be effective when there is a lot of information up there, but most of the time, the audience can follow the information on the simpler slides. It is more pleasing to have the presenter looking forward at the audience instead of looking back at the screen. It is much easier to get a good video with the presenter downstage with the slide behind and slightly above him. It makes it easier to light also.

Movement

Many presentation consultants coach that a lot of movement gives the presenter and the audience a sense of energy and helps the presenter "stay in the flow." This technique may need to be modified for a video/DVD presentation. Constant pacing back and forth makes it difficult for the camera to follow; resulting in either a wide shot or a constant panning that will make the viewer sick. Come to think of, constant pacing can sometimes make the live audience sick also. Try to use your arms and body to express yourself without moving out of a five by five area, for the most part. There are times when moving through the audience or making a dramatic move from one end to the other is effective, but not if it is done throughout the presentation. Use this energy instead in your vocal and gesture expression.

Lighting

This is one of the classic trade-off issues between the live audience and video cameras. Low lighting is often aesthetically pleasing for presentation materials and the comfort of the audience and presenter. However, even good cameras need some light and the more light, the less grainy. Positioning the presenter as described above makes it possible to put one diffused spot-type light on the presenter without spilling on the screen. This light will likely be positioned somewhat to the side and as far back out of the way as possible. Some room lighting on the audience would be desirable. Fluorescent lighting should be avoided if possible.

Clothing

Best to wear a colored shirt, such as blue. Avoid solid white, thin stripes or a big contrast between a dark suit and light shirt, if possible. Most men's suits make it very easy to apply a lapel mic and make it as inconspicuous as a tie tack. Women's suits are also easy, but a dress or jacketless shirt that has no collar or neckline is a little more difficult to deal with. Since there is usually not a lot of time to mic a presenter, it is recommended to wear a suit jacket if possible.

Audio

Finally, it is necessary to mic any presenter. Often the presenter will already have a microphone in order to be heard over a house AV sound system. The video camera person then has the option of taking an audio cable out of the house sound system, providing he can position himself close enough to the system or has enough cable and set-up time to be further away. Speaking of set-up time, the camera operator will need a few extra minutes to test the house sound coming into his camera, which is best done prior to the audience entering the room. The sound may come through distorted or be incompatible with the camera. This is why I usually opt for putting my own wireless mic on the presenter, even if he/she is already wearing one. The best option would be to use both sources, just in case, but this is not always feasible. If and only if the entire presentation will take place from a podium, a second mic (wireless or hard-wired) can be secured to the podium. The general audio of the audience will be picked up by the presenter's mic and possibly a secondary ambient mic. Additional considerations exist for Q&A.

Q&A

There is often structured and unstructured Q&A and it is difficult to anticipate everything that may happen and record all this audio. A handheld mic could be run around the room or a boom mic operator could go crazy trying to cover it all, but usually it is very cumbersome for the presenter to manage this. We suggest the presenter always try to repeat the questions for the benefit of the viewers and the live audience.

Set-Up Time

Setting-up and testing just one camera, one wireless mic and one light, takes at least a half hour, preferably one hour to be safe, if possible. The cameraperson needs to add time on top of this to make sure he/she can park and get into the facility in a timely fashion. For more than two presenters, most cameras have two inputs, a separate audio/mixer package would be needed and set-up time would be doubled. It is best for the presenter or meeting planner and the camera operator to either be familiar with the location or get a good description of the facility by asking all of these questions.

Ask all these questions!

Tips provided by Channel Three Productions
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